

Strategic Health Care Marketing

Strategic Business Development and Marketing for Health Care Executives

Is the Mass Media Still Relevant for Health Care Marketing?

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By Ross K. Goldberg

It was just a blink of an eye ago when corporate America understood, some albeit begrudgingly, the need for a solid media relations program as a way to get their organization's story told. Product advertising was fine, and promotional gimmicks were exciting; but the inherent credibility found in the mass media's conveying of the message was what **built brands**, loyalty and trust.

Over recent years that thinking has taken a shellacking as many health care leaders and their corporate counterparts believed they struck gold in their Yukon with the emergence of the Internet. Why work through the media or engage media relations professionals to reach your audience when you can touch them directly through websites, blogs, Facebook, LinkedIn, Pinterest and assorted means of self-publishing?

The question before the house thus becomes one that a generation ago would have seemed unfathomable to even ponder: "Is the mass media still relevant?"

A recent survey of millennials conducted by Business Wire (BW) provides little help in knowing which way to turn. According to BW only 4 percent of those queried trust blog posts from a CEO and a mere 16 percent trust articles authored by a CEO. This makes the 33 percent who still trust press releases look pretty good by comparison, but the barometer isn't much to crow about.

Just as flight redefined travel a century ago and the Cineplex forced us to think differently about the movie-going experience, America is in a period of transition as we take a new look at the very definition of media. Doing so requires a reexamination of not only what is considered "conventional media" but, equally as important, having the ability to separate the media itself from the medium through which it is delivered.

The New York Times delivered online is still *The New York Times*—readers are just accessing it through the convenience of their computer screen or mobile device rather than picking up a hard copy on their driveway or at the corner newsstand. As much as baby boomers (me included) might enjoy holding a paper and smelling the newsprint, we are probably not too many years away from that simply becoming a faded memory and future generations asking curiously "Did you really cut down trees for that?" So while the delivery method may no longer be conventional, these are still newspapers that hopefully still ascribe to journalistic principles and responsibilities.

Strange as it may sound, that basic concept is tricky for many to embrace. I remember sitting with a health care executive not that many years ago and being forced to defend the value of online media coverage. His responses ranged from "Who reads it?" to "Who cares?" as we argued vehemently for the importance of tapping into this digital medium. To him online coverage was the icing, but he was paying his PR agency to deliver the cake. Today it is



increasingly apparent that online coverage in respected media outlets *is* the cake, and I would no more trade away such coverage than I would trade Manhattan for a string of beads.

We are long past the point of debating the evolution of newspaper distribution strategy as financial realities and consumer behavior makes it clear where the world is going. The larger question concerns weighing the value and importance of the mass media as compared to information that a hospital or other health care organization may post themselves to their website or to any number of [social media platforms](#). It is here that PR professionals should take note. For while Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and other 21st century communication mediums serve an important purpose and are growing in followers, conventional mass media should not be ignored and should remain a critical component in any [health care organization's public relations strategy](#). Here's why:

1. As strange as it may sound in this era of hyper-partisan news programming and questions surrounding a news anchor's integrity, mass media still carries an inherent credibility not found in self-publishing. For some people the medium is indeed the message, and conventional media is still considered more objective than information an organization posts online. That is because of the long-standing belief that news conveyed through a respected and time-proven source has undergone an "editorial filter" and received a "third party endorsement." This is particularly important as today's health care PR professionals turn their efforts and resources away from simply driving volume and instead focus on messaging that emphasizes [improving health and supporting wellness](#).
2. Mass media still has the ability to deliver numbers that, except in rare (usually celebrity-based) cases, individual social media efforts simply cannot match. A PR colleague of mine recently shared a story about a client who became overly nervous when eight negative comments appeared online. His response was "Eight comments? Let me know when it reaches 800, and then we'll talk." His point was made. Newspapers, radio, television and magazines all still deliver millions; and, although numbers for conventional media are dwindling, they remain large enough that attention must be paid. The counter argument of course is that "all health care is local" and the fact that NBC "Nightly News" reaches 8 million people is irrelevant. Perhaps, but drilling down to community-focused mass media, what hospital CEO wouldn't like to see a positive story about their institution in the local paper or on the local TV news? And what hospital PR person wouldn't get high marks for finding a way to creatively frame a story so it does indeed gain national prominence? Isn't that part of the art of PR?
3. A good media relations program has always consisted of a combination of various mediums, which each serves its own purpose: print for stories that require more in-depth reporting; television for stories that have an interesting visual element. Social media has its own value, too—immediacy, brevity and the potential for high-viewer interaction and visual storytelling. But that's all social media is—another tool and another outlet to convey an organization's message. It should be placed into the media mix as an addition, not a replacement. This is particularly true when segmenting who you are trying to reach. If your market is older people, they are more likely to use traditional media; while if it's a new and young market, emerging media is likely a better bet. The problem lies with too many PR people who have made social media their catnip. It shouldn't be, and that is the easy way out. Because both new media and conventional media have their strengths and shortcomings—and because everyone does not welcome change at the same pace—it is the power of all of these mediums, working together in an integrated approach that fashions an effective campaign.

Let there be no doubt, digital communication is no short-lived experiment: It has forevermore changed the way organizations communicate as surely as Ted Turner redefined mass media 35 years ago with the launch of America's first 24-hour cable news channel. Social media allows users to read the text of the news while having access to related videos and user interaction that often provides better understanding of an event. It is perfect food for America's appetite for instant gratification and customization, and today's era of "citizen journalism" has indeed changed the way people get their news. But if you think mass media has followed Elvis out of the building, it may be time to think again.

Mass media is not yet ready to write its memoirs.

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